

The Desert Fathers' Beasts

Crocodiles in Medieval German Monastic Literature

Abstract

This paper explores the literary representations of one of the most terrifying animals in the medieval imagination, the crocodile, in two monastic texts written in the German vernacular (*Väterbuch*, *Alemannische Vitaspatrum*). The literary figure of the crocodile in these religious texts combines ancient knowledge of crocodiles, biblical motifs, allegorical attributions and the lived experience of the Christian hermits, who encountered crocodiles as a part of their environment. Thus, crocodiles appear simultaneously as representations of divine power, as devilish beasts, as challenges to ascetic life in the desert, and as creatures miraculously tamed by the hermits' charisma. The ambiguous status of the desert as a space of temptation and redemption is thus reflected in literary representations of the crocodile, which in turn can be understood as a reflection on monastic life in general, intended for the medieval audience of the texts discussed.

1. E.g. in Aesop's fable ἀνδροφόνος (the manslayer) a murderer is running from his pursuers and encounters first a wolf, then a snake, and finally a crocodile in the wilderness. While he manages to escape the wolf and the snake, the crocodile as the most fierce animal swallows him at last. Cf. Äsop 38f. For a general introduction to the motif of the crocodile in literature cf. Pöge-Alder.

2. Another example of the combination of symbolic and natural aspects in the representation of animals in premodern literature is given by Weitbrecht, *Lupus in fabula* 23.

1 Introduction

The crocodile is a fascinating but horrifying animal, which often represents a physical danger to humans, while also serving as a figuration of evil, in European literature.¹ This is possibly based on its very natural features and behaviour: as opposed to other wild animals, crocodiles cannot possibly be tamed. They represent a terrible threat to any other creature approaching them. Thus, it would never be safe for humans to live in proximity with crocodiles. While the Egyptians worshiped the crocodile as a sacred creature, in the Bible and in ancient Greek and Roman literature the crocodile has always represented a terrible danger to humans. In the Christian tradition, moreover, it is a figuration of the devil and of hell (cf. Boskovits 659). However, as opposed to other fiendish and demonic creatures, e.g. dragons, crocodiles could be observed in their natural environment on a regular basis. Accordingly, the natural behaviour of crocodiles constantly determined its literary representations.²

3. E.g. in Ulrich of Etzenbach's *Alexander* or in Albrecht of Scharfenberg's *Jüngerer Tituel*.

4. The Christian ascetic movement of the so-called Desert Fathers arose in the fourth century in the Middle East. The Desert Fathers are revered for their ascetic life, they are considered the founders of monastic culture and many of them are regarded, in the Roman Catholic Church, as saints. The writings on the life and teachings of the Desert Fathers were in medieval times well known from the Latin books of *Vitaspatrum* (Lives of the Fathers).

5. Williams lists 84 manuscripts containing text of the *Alemannische Vitaspatrum*. Cf. Williams 453 and 455.

6. The critical edition of the *Alemannische Vitaspatrum* contains reproductions of the two original texts and represents the fifteenth century amendments in the appendix. Cf. *Die Alemannischen Vitaspatrum* 17*f.

The Middle High German term *kokodrille* (or *kokadrille*) is a loanword from the Latin *crocodilus* (gr. κροκόδειλος), more specifically from the Medieval Latin *coco-* or *corcodrillus* (cf. Lexer 1: 1662). In secular medieval literature, crocodiles commonly appear in narratives reporting travels to the Middle East, then a natural habitat of crocodiles.³ However, they feature much more prominently in certain religious texts. In the following, I will concentrate on the narratives and teachings of the Desert Fathers,⁴ known by the Medieval Latin title of *Vitaspatrum*; firstly, because one might find many more stories about crocodiles here than in other literary genres, and secondly because these texts reveal how four main sources of literary animals are merged: the natural history of the ancient Greek and Roman traditions, the Bible, the allegorical tradition, and lived experience of nature. In the following, I shall focus on two texts that were translated into the German language in the context of the emerging religious lay movement from the thirteenth century on: 1. the *Väterbuch* that was written in the late thirteenth century, probably for a chivalric order (cf. Traulsen 18–24, 44–46), and 2. the *Alemannischen Vitaspatrum* (*Alemannic Vitaspatrum*), both among the most commonly reproduced texts of the late Middle Ages in the German language.⁵ Unlike the *Väterbuch*, which is written in verse, the texts of the *Alemannischen Vitaspatrum* are written in prose. Originally consisting of two separate texts dating back to the early fourteenth century, a comprehensive text of the *Alemannischen Vitaspatrum* was first published around 1430 in Nuremberg.⁶ According to the surviving manuscripts and prints, the *Alemannischen Vitaspatrum* were mostly read in monasteries and by religious laymen. The *Nuremberg Version* was especially read by members of female religious orders, namely the female Dominican Order (cf. Williams 455).

2 Ancient sources

One major source of medieval knowledge about animals was the ancient natural history, as found in the works of Herodotus, Pliny the Elder, and Isidorus of Seville. In the eighth chapter of the *Naturalis historia*, for example, Pliny the Elder describes the crocodile as a most peculiar animal with many unique features (cf. Plinius 8.72–77): it lives both in the water and on land, it is the only land animal that does not use its tongue, and it is also the only animal moving its upper and not its lower jaw when biting. Furthermore, Pliny reports

that the crocodile hatches from a very small egg and that no other animal shows such growth in its development as the crocodile. According to Pliny, the crocodile is particularly dangerous due to its biting, its claws, and its impenetrable skin scales. These ancient descriptions of the crocodile were consistently adapted and varied in the literature of later times. In the Christian context, traces of the ancient knowledge about crocodiles can be found for example in Isidorus' of Seville *Etymologiae* and even in the well-known *Ebstorfer Weltkarte*.⁷ The fascination deriving from crocodiles as natural wonders is shown most obviously by the fact that stuffed crocodiles circulated in medieval courtly culture; for example, Seville Cathedral contains a crocodile that was given to Alfonso X by the sultan of Egypt in 1260 (cf. Daston and Park 84). However, by taking it into the sacral space of the church, the crocodile is not only treated as a natural wonder here, but also as a religious symbol connected to biblical depictions of the crocodile.

In the Bible, Leviathan in the Book of Job is the most impressive and extensive depiction of a crocodile-like creature. God shows Job quite plainly the overwhelming power recognizable in his creation of Behemoth and Leviathan:⁸

An extrahere poteris Leviathan hamo et fune ligabis linguam ejus [...] pone super eum manum tuam memento belli, nec ultra addas loqui. (*Vulgata*, Job 40.20–27)

Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook? or his tongue with a cord [...]? lay thine hand upon him, remember the battle, do no more. (KJV, Job 41.1–8)

Many of the creatures mentioned in the Bible cannot definitely be identified as animals (cf. Roling 321). While Behemoth might be identified as a hippopotamus, the Leviathan appears, in God's speech, as a crocodile (cf. Feliks; Weber 172; Bright 34): this monster is inhabiting a river, it is armed with teeth and scales, its eyes are glowing,⁹ and it is reeling in the waters. God is emphasizing that the monster should never be approached by man, it should not be hunted nor tamed, its skin should not be traded, and it would be hopeless to attack it.

It is possible that the biblical description of Leviathan as a crocodile is indebted to the natural characteristics of this animal. But here

7. The most accessible presentation of this extensive medieval *mappa mundi* is provided by a [website hosted by the University of Lüneburg](#).

8. Bright 24–39 lists the references to Behemoth and Leviathan in the Bible and discusses possible meanings of the creatures.

9. This unusual feature can be explained: crocodiles have a reflective layer of membrane at the back of the eye (cf. Bright 37).

again the uniqueness of Leviathan as the most frightful and evil beast is especially emphasized:

Non est super terram potestas quæ comparetur ei qui factus est ut nullum timeret omne sublime videt ipse est rex super universos filios superbiæ. (*Vulgata*, Job 41.24 f.)

Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear. / He beholdeth all high things: he is a king over all the children of pride. (KJV, Job 41.33 f.)

In the Book of Job, God not only warns mankind against Behemoth and Leviathan, but he also promises a peaceful coexistence with the wild animals for those who follow him unconditionally. In the New Testament, an image of a state of peace with the wild animals is given as well, e.g. when, according to the synoptic gospels, Christ is tempted and challenged in the desert:

Et erat in deserto quadraginta diebus et quadraginta noctibus et tentabatur a Satana eratque cum bestiis et angeli ministrabant illi. (*Vulgata*, Marcus 1.13)

And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him. (KJV, Mark 1.12–13)

Accordingly, the wilderness with its inhabitants appears as most ambiguous. It is a space of hopelessness where the devil is present, but also a space of heavenly support and peace with the wild animals.¹⁰ The ambiguous status of the wilderness and its inhabitants can also be found in the early Christian ascetic literature which describes Christian hermits and is an important link between early Christian writings and later European hagiography.

The Christian allegorical tradition has its roots in biblical literature and the history of nature from antiquity. In commentaries on biblical texts, the crocodile is often represented as an incarnation of danger. Accordingly, Leviathan was identified with the Antichrist in later times.¹¹ In the Christian *Physiologus*, the crocodile is mentioned only when it comes to the *niluus* (*hydrus*), a legendary creature, possibly an otter, that allows the crocodile to swallow it, but then kills the crocodile by freeing itself through bursting out of the

10. Weitbrecht, in a recent paper, points out that ascetic narratives are dealing with the border between humanity and wilderness and that thus the differences between human and animal can become fluid. However, in contrast to my approach here, Weitbrecht concentrates on benevolent animals in the desert and is especially interested in human-animal communities. Cf. Weitbrecht, *Scorpionum socius et ferarum*.

11. E.g. Gregory the Great in the *Morals on the Book of Job* 8.13, which is of great importance for the medieval reception of Job.

12. The motif of the sacred figure bursting out of the stomach of the evil beast is also transferred to hagiography. According to the *Legenda aurea*, Margaret of Antioch encountered a dragon while being imprisoned for her Christian belief. This monster swallowed her wholly before she also burst out of its stomach (cf. *Legenda aurea* 2: 1218). However, Jacobus de Voragine stresses that this story is considered to be *apocryphum et frivolum*.

13. For a general introduction to the topic of biblical animals cf. Riede 29–56.

crocodile's stomach (*Physiologus* 53 f.). This idea can also be found in Pliny's *Naturalis historia*. However, the *Physiologus* interprets this scene in a special way. According to the *Physiologus*, the swallowed *niluus* is an image of Christ descending to hell and defeating the devil. In this respect, the crocodile here stands for hell and thus for the ultimate evil.¹²

As I am trying to show in this paper, Christian hagiography refers to the biblical Leviathan as a specific figuration of the crocodile.¹³ Additionally, it complements the biblical notion of the crocodile with other ideas of the concept of the wild animal. Unlike dragons and the monster Leviathan in premodern times, crocodiles lived in the rivers of Palestine and Egypt and thus were part of a wilderness in the Middle East well known to its human inhabitants. In contrast to most of the later European readers of the hagiography deriving from the Desert Fathers, the hermits living in these deserts encountered crocodiles as living creatures dwelling in the rivers in their environment. Accordingly, the literary texts narrating the hermits' encounters with crocodiles represent both the devilish characteristics of literary tradition as well as the lived experience of these animals. The medieval recipients of the German translations of the *Vitaspatrum* that I am especially interested in were thus confronted with the figure of the crocodile according to the biblical text, to the allegorical tradition which had adopted the ancient sources, and to the real-life experience of the hermits.

3 Crocodiles in the German translations of the *Vitaspatrum*

My first example from the *Väterbuch* is narrated in analogy to the biblical text in the Book of Job. There, Eliphaz is speaking of God's punishment and grace:

Beatus homo qui corripitur a Domino. increpationem ergo Domini ne reprobes quia ipse vulnerat et medetur percutit et manus ejus sanabunt in sex tribulationibus liberabit te et in septima non tangent te malum [...] in vastitate et fame ridebis et bestias terræ non formidabis sed cum lapidibus regionum pactum tuum et bestia terræ pacificæ erunt tibi.
(*Vulgata*, Iob 5.17–23)

Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: For he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole. He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee. [...] At destruction and famine thou shalt laugh: neither shalt thou be afraid of the beasts of the earth. For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee. (KJV, Job 5.17–23)

This passage is adopted in the *Vitaspatrum*. A short episode at the end of the *Väterbuch* tells of monks who travel through the desert and is connected to the passage of the Book of Job quoted above. The narrator speaks of six and one dangers of their voyage (thirst and exhaustion, bad roads, mud, flood, robbers, shipwreck). The seventh danger in the *Väterbuch* arises from the curiosity of the traveling monks. The monks arrive at the banks of the Nile and discover a group of crocodiles lying motionlessly in the sun. When the monks curiously approach the crocodiles, they wake up to attack them. Only the intervention of Christ can save them:

Crist der vil getruwe,
 Der zu allen zite nuwe
 Mit helfe bi den vrunden ist,
 Loste uns wol zu der vrist.
 Sine vorhte quam vil schiere
 Uf die wazzertiere.
 Sie ilten in der selben stunt
 Wider in des wazzers grunt,
 Rehte als ein engel were ob in,
 Der sie sluge von uns hin. (VB 11483–94)

We were then saved by the loyal Christ who always helps his followers. His terror came over the animals. They hurried back into the water as if an angel were pushing them back from us.

The references of this text to the Book of Job are obvious: firstly, there is the quotation of the six troubles and of the saving by God from the seventh danger. Secondly, the monks run into the seventh

14. This motif is quite common in the *Vitaspatrum*. Cf. Weber 184.

15. Curiosity in medieval hagiography is further discussed by Schnyder.

danger because they do not seem to fear the crocodiles enough, similar to those ignoring God's warning against Leviathan. However, the notion of the angel throwing the beasts back into the swamp¹⁴ also suggests an eschatological dimension of the scene: one may read the crocodiles allegorically – according to the interpretations of Leviathan as the Antichrist – as the devil coming out of hell to attack humankind but eventually being repelled by the heavenly powers. Thus, the scene is connected to the apocalyptic struggle between the Archangel Michael and the devil at the end of days. But the beasts are not only figurations of Leviathan and incarnations or representations of evil. As dangers and as marvels, the animals are natural inhabitants of the desert and also represent the overwhelming power of God, and thus their divine origin is reflected in the monks' curiosity and admiration.¹⁵

The second example I wish to highlight is a story of the deeds of the famous Desert Father Helenus, told by another hermit named Copres. Saint Helenus has been living in the desert for years and fosters good relationships with the animals inhabiting his environment. Helenus then visits a monastery that has a serious problem. The priest who normally celebrates the communal mass lives beyond a river occupied by a crocodile. The German text from which I am quoting specifies the description of this animal:

[Es] wer ein kocodrillus in das wasser komen, das ist halbes en tier vnd halbes ein wurn, vnd ist wol zweinzig elnen lang, vnd vor dem getar nieman vber das wasser komen, wan swas er lúten vnd viches ergrifet das ist alles tot. (*Die Aleman-nischen Vitaspatrum* 118. 6–9)

A crocodile had come to the river. It is half animal and half serpent and it is twenty ells long, and nobody can cross the water, because every person and every animal it catches is brought to death.

The crocodile here appears as an animal (*tier*) that is a natural part of the monks' environment. However, it is also named a serpent (*wurn*) and therefore appears as a figuration of evil. When Helenus hears that the animal is preventing the monks from celebrating mass, he offers his help. He promises to make sure that the priest may join the congregation. Having reached the dangerous water, Helenus

prays for a safe crossing. The crocodile approaches and it “wart als ein senftes schefli, vnd tet sinen ruggen nider vnd liez in uf es sizzen vnd trüg in vber” (*Die Alemannischen Vitaspatrum* 118.15 f.; “started behaving like a meek lamb, lowered its back to let him sit on it and carried him to the other bank of the river”). The notion of somebody crossing a river by riding on a crocodile’s back is a literary topos and can already be found in Pliny’s description of the crocodile. In the *Alemannischen Vitaspatrum*, it is transformed into a hagiographic motif: as soon as it approaches the blessed Helenus, the monstrous beast starts behaving like a tamed animal.

Helenus then searches and finds the priest and takes him back to the river bank. Due to his fearlessness and humble way of talking, the priest identifies Helenus as a holy man. However, the story is not yet complete. Helenus calls the crocodile to allow the passage back to the other bank:

Zehant do kam das vngehúre tier us dem wasser, do es erst sin stimme erhörte, also so vngestümlich, das das wasser da von wart bewegt recht als ein grozer wint dar in komen were, vnd neigte sinen ruggen nider. dem heiligen vatter uf ze sizzenne. (*Die Alemannischen Vitaspatrum* 118.18–32)

When it heard his voice, the monstrous animal immediately came out of the water. It was so impetuous that the water was moved as if a great wind was churning it up. And it bent its back for the holy father to sit on.

The behaviour of the crocodile evokes the image of the biblical Leviathan churning up the waters, but the beast is also bending its back for a rider like a tamed animal. The priest accompanying Helenus is scared, but then trusts Helenus and crosses the river on the back of the beast together with him. In this regard, the crocodile acts as a helping figure for the hermit and the Christian congregation, but on the other hand, the ambiguous status of the crocodile is quite obvious, as only the presence of the saint guarantees the obedience of the animal. The description of the crocodile’s behaviour and the fearful reaction of the others reveals that even though the crocodile has been a trustworthy ally to Helenus, it is still an extremely dangerous being. Having reached the other bank, Helenus turns to the crocodile and says the following words:

“Swie das si das du mir gehorsam sist gewesen, so ist doch besser das du sterbest dan das du grôz vbel begest.” Mit dem selben wort do lag der cocodrille tot. (S. 118, Z. 39 f. u. S. 119, Z. 40.)

“Although you have been obedient to me, it is better that you die rather than that you do a lot of evil.” By this word the crocodile lay dead.

The holy Desert Father decides to remove the crocodile from its place and thus removes its ambiguous double nature of good and evil. Here, the ability to approach the evil creature is limited only to the most blessed hermit. Accordingly, the people living in the surrounding area feel the need to get rid of the creature's dead body. They come together and bury it “das der luft nit wurde von dem bösen smak verunreint” (*Die Alemannischen Vitaspatrum* 119.3; “so that the air would not be not polluted by the evil smell”), thus removing ritually every trace of evil from their homes.

The polyvalence of the crocodile as described above continues throughout the *Vitaspatrum*. The beasts may be shown to be the hermits' enemies, but in some of the stories, crocodiles may also serve as helping figures for the Desert Fathers or at least as equal creatures, as is shown in the third example (*Die Alemannischen Vitaspatrum* 328 f.) I wish to discuss: two brothers are living together in a monastery. While one of them is fasting strictly, it is the other brother who is widely known for his obedience and is revered as an extraordinary monk. The fasting monk envies his brother for his fame and decides to test him. He leads his brother to a body of water which is inhabited by a group of crocodiles and commands him to dive into the water. When his brother follows this command, the crocodiles gather around him but, instead of tearing him to pieces, they start licking his body.

Apparently, the crocodiles here do not behave like wild beasts. The focus of the story, however, is centred on the relationship of the two monks. Obedience and selflessness are of central importance to monastic cultures, which are based on a strong ideal of community. By command of his brother, the obedient monk approaches the dangerous creatures, who then unexpectedly behave as if tamed and thus reveal the acknowledgement of the virtues of the monk. They turn out to be obedient to God, so obedient that they even give up their crocodile nature through which they otherwise would tear the monk

apart. Danger and distance between animal and human are turned into sweet temper and proximity revealing the power of God, favouring the exemplary monk and the community. When the untameable animals are behaving as if they were tamed, they represent the peaceful community in the desert in the way this community is shown in the Book of Isaiah (1.12), the Book of Job (5.23) and the Gospel of Mark (1.12 f.) (cf. Riede 153–164). In fact, they also represent the monastic ideal of a peaceful community of equals that was broken by the envy of the other monk beforehand.

4 The hermit, the beast, and the desert

When St. Anthony, who is one of the most famous Desert Fathers, lives in the desert, he is threatened by the devil appearing with a pack of demons in the shape of wild animals (although not as crocodiles). In difference to famous visual depictions of Anthony in later times, some medieval book illustrations show the natural character of the scene by picturing the demons not as monstrous creatures, but as animals attacking the saint.¹⁶ The Latin *Vitaspatrum* also describe the typical behaviours of the various species and emphasize that *haec singula secundum suam fremebant naturam* (Rosweyde 132; “every single creature expresses itself according to its nature”). The followers of the devil do not appear as demons, but rather as wild desert animals. One reason for this ambiguous status of the creatures between animal and demon might be that the ascetic withdrawal into the desert is a confrontation with nature, as well as a confrontation with the self.¹⁷ The ascetics are encountering their own nature when being threatened by nature in the desert. Accordingly, in ascetic literature, the desert with its inhabitants always refers to a real as well as to a symbolic environment. The outer environment and the inner challenges are bound together and thus the texts do not make a clear distinction between the natural dangers of the desert and the imaginary dangers and evil of the devil in the desert. This applies to the figure of the crocodile as well. The crocodile in ascetic literature turns out to be characterized especially by its most dangerous and untameable nature. The crocodiles’ most salient characteristic is that they become dangerous when approached by humans. Crocodiles do not visit the hermits in their homes, but the monks encounter them on their journeys. The crocodiles frighten and test the inhabitants of the desert, but in the hermits’ presence they can also lose their predato-

16. E.g. a picture of the demons attacking Anthony in a book of hours that is kept in the National Library of France (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, manuscrits latin 757, 296v). It shows the demons tearing at Anthony in the shape of animals without any demonic features.

17. Referring to Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* Harald Haferland is interpreting the demons in the Desert Father’s literature as externalisations of their inner struggles deriving from the deprivation in the desert. This interpretation could also apply to the ascetic environment more generally, including the wild animals. Cf. Haferland 224.

ry character and thus prove the ascetics' efforts, their charisma and values. In the examples given here, the protagonists approach the crocodiles willingly although aware of the danger: the first approach occurs out of curiosity, the second is an act of support, and the third results from a test for obedience. All three crocodiles are representing figurations of the desert and, at the same time, figurations of evil. Encountering them is dangerous but, at the same time, might show the exceptional quality of the monks' asceticism. The beasts might turn into peaceful animals, but only if they are exemplarily showing the power of holy obedience. A crocodile might even provide a safe river passage to a holy hermit, but it remains to be a danger to everyone else.

The stories of these hermits were normally not read by hermits themselves, but by their successors living in the monasteries and all over the Christian world.¹⁸ The *Vitaspatrum* were not primarily written to give insight into the hermits' specific life, but rather to give examples for Christian monastic values in general. In this perspective, they purport knowledge of life. For those recipients living in the northern, German-speaking countries, the desert and the crocodiles were mere literary constructs. Few had ever seen a crocodile or knew the natural behaviour of a crocodile. Nevertheless, the literary representations of the crocodile in the German texts integrate ancient knowledge on crocodiles, the biblical motif of the crocodile, its allegorical attributions and the lived experience of the deserts fathers with crocodiles as part of their environment. Accordingly, for the readers of the *Väterbuch* or the *Alemannischen Vitaspatrum*, the desert and the figure of the crocodile might have been a basis for meditation and admiration of the dangers and promises waiting for those who dare to choose a monastic life in the tradition of the Desert Fathers.

18. One could even say that the desert life of Christian hermits was primarily a literary construction based on the dichotomy of city versus desert. Cf. Goehring 285f.

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